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Drawing as listening

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In architecture we make drawings to be precise and imprecise. Our imprecise sketches are impressions of what we imagine a space to be; an imprint, an evocation, a possibility. Our precise drawings are made to communicate an arrangement of details; a measurement, an instruction, a reality. Sometimes we use precision and imprecision simultaneously as a way of capturing the illusive conditions of complex socio-spatial worlds. In this essay I explore this possibility of drawing precisely and imprecisely through how a street might be presented as both a geo-political formation as much as an intimate interior. As I child I drew frequently. Making drawings was primarily about having fun, about being able to claim a constant space outside of other requirements to feel the pleasure of how lines and colours land on a page. Gradually, drawing also became a more conscious practice of saying something about me, not only about what I enjoyed but also what I cared about. Having practised as an architect and then as an ethnographer, I have become increasingly compelled by the political possibilities of making drawings about social conditions. In this sense, drawing is both a way of seeing as explored by John Berger, and a way of listening as evoked by Les Back.ⁱ While Berger prompts us to connect who we are with what we are able to see, Back asks us to connect who we see with a slower more immersive process of listening in which image-making is one possibility. Thus the drawing, as a process of finding out, is one potential way of listening.

When I started my doctoral study on the everyday multicultures of a street in South London, I was in every sense an architect who was enrolled in a social sciences programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It was intuitive for me to start fieldwork with a sketch book, and making drawings was a natural way of looking at and imagining the history and culture of the street. I poured over historic maps in the local history library, I sketched out the interiors of the street and I imagined through drawings, how I could capture the vast spectrum of colonisation, class and race that so evidently composed the street. For a while I lived above the street and had a broad sense of the long threads of migration and everyday multi-cultures that shaped its everyday life. Early on in my fieldwork I planned a face-to-face survey where I would speak to each proprietor of each shop along the mile of the Walworth Road.ⁱⁱ I had in my mind's eye a drawing of the street as a connection to the world; a way of evoking the deep histories and wide geographies that constitute this supposedly local stretch of street.ⁱⁱⁱ

I knew I had to design a survey that was brief enough so as not to interrupt the entrepreneurial rhythm of shop life, so I kept to a tight set of questions on a single A4 sheet. My friend and fellow architect Thiresh Govender was in London at the time, and while Thiresh walked the west side of the Walworth Road, I walked the east. We conducted the survey over a few weeks, making time to stop and reflect on what we were capturing. This became a crucial part of making a survey, allowing us time to reflect on the implications of what we were hearing. The face-to-face survey, unlike a set of fixed questions and tick boxes that arrives in your inbox via a computer programme, is much less about gathering data for quantitative processing. It is about an entry point into fieldwork and an initial process of walking and listening in which a complex sense of the whole emerges. Such a survey raises more questions than it yields answers. It follows that an important ethos of making a street-as-world drawing, was not to fix it as a precise representation of a reality at a point in time, but to represent the layers of power over time that compose a place. The drawing is therefore intended to raise more questions than the answers it might suggest.

Thiresh was conversant with ArchiCAD, and each survey entry correlated with a unit along the street and the place where the proprietor was born. The line that emerges between these two points is about a journey across time and space, as captured by Tim Ingold in drawings

that evoke an anthropological set of relations.^{iv} In that apparently simple linear representation between two places is an entire compendium of structures and experiences connected to the geo-politics of borders and crossings, what Doreen Massey captures as ‘a global sense of place’.^v When we saw our completed drawing of the street-as-world for the first time, with the plan of the Walworth Road set above and a map of the world set below, we were compelled by the immense array and density of lines (figure 1). Many further research questions emerged from the process of the drawing, prompting more avenues of ethnographic fieldwork and demanding that relations of power were integral to how individual stories were told.



Figure 1. *Street as World: Walworth Road, 2008.* (Drawn by Thresh Govender).

This was the first of six street-as-world drawings that emerged over a ten-year period, incorporating street in London, Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester and Manchester.^{vi} The drawings each have their own spatial nuances, but together they raise questions about the connections between global displacements and urban emplacements as echoed in the street-as-world drawing of Rye Lane in south London (figure 2). In the political turbulence of our time and place, these drawings evoke for me the long histories of migration and colonisation in the current formation of UK cities. They also suggest the constricted claims the nation has on citizenship, capturing instead a planetary space of exchange and prompting questions of how people make sense of where they find themselves in time and space.



Figure 2. *Street as World: Peckham Rye Lane, 2012*. (Drawn by Sadiq Toffa).

Another process of listening to the street involves drawing from an interior space, bringing us up close to the human dimensions of activity and the cultures that shape its arrangements and atmospheres (figure 3). Shop interiors provide an inner space to write about the intimate curation of transactions and the ordering of objects for sale. Captured in plan, the spatial subdivisions suggest how social life is configured to respond to economic relations, an interior condition that reflects larger forces at play or sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'the world reversed'.^{vii} On Rye Lane spaces directly facing the street are most intensely divided and occupied. Goods are arranged in tiered rows to face the street, and where possible, parts of the shop interior edge onto the pavement. This is where room is made for as many wares as possible to be displayed, and where rental per square meter is at its highest premium. Typically, a two square meter portion of this precious zone is sublet to proprietors who deal in mobile phone hardware, but more significantly in software. Phones are euphemistically 'unlocked' and repairs are undertaken then and there.

In cities like London, where the property market has been over-primed with multiple scales of speculation following the global financial crisis, the need for small spaces and more varied forms of tenure is evident in the sub-divided shop interiors on Rye Lane. Large shops are subdivided into small shops, and small shops into smaller shops still. The smallest increment for rent is the chair, commanding between £50 and £80 per week, not only accommodating the flexible needs of mostly women hair and nail stylists, but also a rapidly growing area of retail that stretches across the UK. This re-parcelling of the high street is also part of a larger process of the changing nature of work in a context of growing casualisation, unemployment and shifts towards self-employment. The emergence of co-work spaces reflects innovative responses to de-regulated labour markets and over-inflated urban property values. Dividing and sharing city space is a growing urban practice where precarity and its necessary counterpart of creativity are entangled. Other than the head lease for the main shop that is drawn in a thick black outline, all divisions, activities and objects are drawn with the same line weight. This is to evoke the simultaneous presence of people, spaces and things that together constitute the interior life of the city.

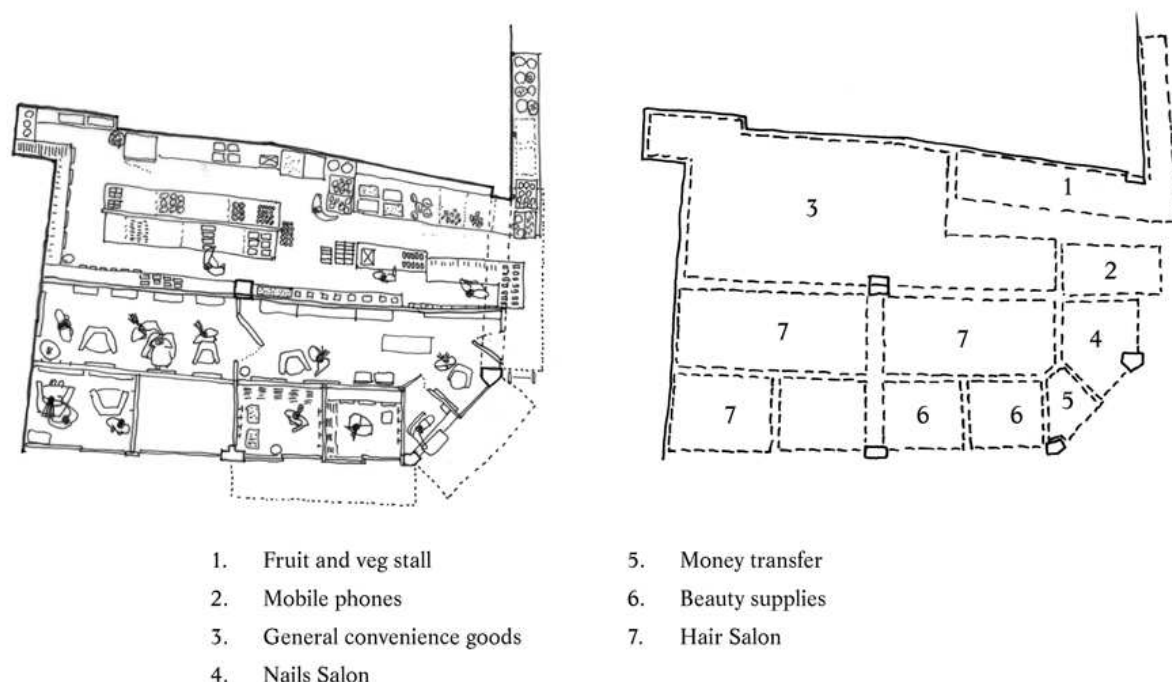


Figure 3. *Shop Interior: Rye Lane, London 2012*. (Drawn by Nicolas Palominos).

The drawings in this essay are all slow affairs. Since they are tied to intensive processes of listening, they take time. Sometimes it feels appropriate to render the drawing in precise lines, reflecting its survey methodology as in the street-as-world drawings. At other times a simple sheet of paper and black pen suffice to capture an approximate sketch of a street interior. What remains crucial, are the important imprecisions of social and cultural life that can only ever be partially contained in the precise form of a line.

Notes

ⁱ John Berger, 1972, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin: London.

Les Back, 2007, *The Art of Listening*, Berg: London.

ⁱⁱ Suzanne Hall, 2010, *A Mile of Mixed Blessings*, Ph.D Dissertation, London School of Economics & Political Science.

ⁱⁱⁱ Suzanne Hall, 2010, "Picturing Difference: Juxtaposition, collage and layering of a multi-ethnic street." *Anthropology Matters* 12.1: 1-17.

^{iv} Tim Ingold, 2011, *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, movements, lines*, Ashgate: London.

^v Doreen Massey, 1994, "A Global Sense of Place." *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity: Cambridge, 146-156.

^{vi} Suzanne Hall, Julia King and Robin Finlay, 2015, "Envisioning Migration", *New Diversities*, 17.2: 59-72.

^{vii} Pierre Bourdieu, 1979 [1960], *Algeria 1960: The Disenchantment of the World, the Sense of Honour, the Kabyle House or the World Reversed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.